

Comics: Meet the Artist With Wiley Miller Artist/Creator "Non Sequitur"

Hosted by Suzanne Tobin

Washington Post Comics Editor

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[http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/01/cartoon\\_wiley051101.htm](http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/01/cartoon_wiley051101.htm)

Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion,  
hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin.

This week, Wiley Miller creator of the cartoon panel "Non Sequitur"  
is online to discuss his cartoon, the pace of creating a cartoon on a  
daily basis and what his work is all about.

Wiley's cartoon strip revolves around the idea of spotting the absurd  
things that happen in every day life. The cartoonist also approaches  
the design of Non Sequitur to maximize the use of the small space  
allotted to comic strips. This emphasis on drawing and composition  
brings back a quality of art that has been lost since the comics  
began to shrink.

Submit your questions and comments before or during the discussion.

Previous Comics Discussions:

"Speedbump" Cartoonist Dave Coverly (April 27, 2001)

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control  
over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions  
for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer  
questions.

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Suzanne Tobin: Greetings, comics fans! Welcome to our second edition  
of Live Online "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today our guest is Wiley  
Miller, creator of "Non Sequitur." Before we start in on our readers'  
questions, let me welcome you.

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Silver Spring, Md.: When did you start drawing? Was it always cartoons? Who is your all time favorite public figure to draw inspiration from?

Wiley: I've been drawing for as long as I can remember. I've always been of the belief that cartoonists are born, just like musicians or any of the other artists. We're not like "normal" children. We weren't just satisfied with reading the comics, we had go off and draw them. It's a lifelong endeavor. I always wanted to be a cartoonist, but I pursued the fine arts to hone my craft. As for public figures, they all inspire me, but not in the way they'd hope to.

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Cranston, R.I.: Where did you get inspiration for Danae? She's my favorite character of yours.

Wiley: Well, she's one of my favorite daughters, and her name is Danae. She is now grown, but the characteristics of the real life Danae and the cartoon Danae, both young and grown, are the same, exaggerated to fit a cartoon format.

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Washington, D.C.: Did you 2000 election strips draw much hate mail? If so, how do you respoond?

Wiley: Yes, all from Republicans, who are sore winners. I responded to them by explaining to them that this is what I do--I'm a satirist. I hold no party allegiances. To me, Republicans and Democrats are all the same, they're all scum. There's no shortage of idiocy going on in politics, and that's my stock in trade. This election was THE most idiotic thing to come along in 100 yearsand something no self-respecting satirist could pass up.

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Fairfax, Va.: Any books just out/coming up? Been a fan since I first saw you in the Post. "Dead Lawyers" still remains one of my most-read books.

Wiley: I've got three books out now. Thank you for your compliment on my first book, "Dead Lawyers and Other Pleasant Thoughts." My other two that are out now are "The Non Sequitur Survival Guide for the '90s" and the most recent is "Non Sequitur's Beastly Things." (Here's a shameless plug, click on the borders link and order it now.) I'm hoping to have a new book out soon which is a compilation of all my lawyer cartoons. The working title is "The Non Sequitur Legal Briefs."

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Leavenworth, Kan.: How do you keep coming up with new ideas, day after day after day?

Wiley: Sheer unmitigated genius.

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Costa Mesa, Calif.: Wiley,  
Non Sequitur is a terrific cartoon! Thanks for contributing so much to the world of cartooning. I would like to know about your coloring technique for Sunday cartoons. The colors are so different from the typical Sunday cartoons. Could you explain your process, including the medium/media and brands that you use?  
Thank you.

Wiley: It's interesting that you should ask. There's an article in last week's Editor and Publisher magazine, by David Astor. You can read it on their Web site. The URL is <http://www.mediainfo.com/ephome/news/newshtm/webnews/syn043001.htm>. This is one of my proudest achievements in the industry in that I broke the "color barrier" in the Sunday comics, by introducing

processed color--as opposed to spot color--back in 1994. I've since continued to push the envelope in developing better color techniques to the point where I'm the only one in the business that hand colors.

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Suzanne Tobin: It sounds pretty complicated. Do you mean other cartoonists don't color their own strips?

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Wiley: A lot of it will be explained in that article if your readers want more details.

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Herndon, Va.: I enjoy your comics very much, and try not to miss any. I have had this burning question though, as the subject of Langley HS (class of '69) has found its way into your work on several occasions. What's the connection?

Wiley: I think it's only come up once or twice, when they were having high school reunions. I just did it as a little howdy. Yes, I went to Langley, and graduated in the Class of '69.

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Victoria, BC (not a state!): Do you find that you prefer the day-to-day missives, as opposed to some of the serial work you did (like with your radio-show host)? Do you plan to do any more serials, other than on weekends, and do you find it more challenging than the missives?

Wiley: They are two completely different styles of cartooning. I enjoy doing both. One is an editorial style, topical style humor. But I also like to do character driven stories, what Homer and the Ele

series is all about. That was part of the whole foundation of "Non Sequitur," to allow me to go in whatever direction creativity took me.

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Londonderry, Vt.: I have followed the adventures of Homer ever since the "beginning" and was very disappointed at his demise in the papers. Is there a "future" in any printed medium for Homer?

Wiley: Homer remains to this day the most popular thing I've ever done in "Non Sequitur." It debuted in '96 and the response was so overwhelming that I was compelled to launch it as a separate Sunday only feature. But despite the credible reader popularity, editors were slow to respond to it, so I decided after a year and a half to take it out of syndication. I had planned to launch it as a Web only feature to be sold on a subscription basis. I had more than 3,000 subscribers signed up for it, but I was, at the time, moving to a new syndicate and getting ready to physically move from Iowa to California, and so it wasn't great timing.

I dropped the plans because I didn't want to take on such an ambitious project if I couldn't do my best work. I didn't want to shortchange my readers. My future plans for it are to do it as a series of books, because it is such a complicated storyline. There is some interest in doing as an live action/animation series on television, so I'm hoping that might happen.

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Portola Valley, Calif.: You seem to have been a little soft LATELY on the present administration, I personally like the way you are able to drive home valid points of reality. When will you do more lambasting of the "Shrubs," (since there does not seem to be a shortage of material)?

Wiley: I did three months worth, beginning in January, through March. There is such a thing as beating something to death. But for the month of May, we will be returning to Bullemia and the "manufactured" energy crisis.

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Capitol Hill: One of the many things I like about your strip is your frequent use of bears. What is it about bears that interests you? Thanks.

Wiley: Bears are funny. They're a historical predator of man.

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Suzanne Tobin: Whoa, for a minute I thought you said editor, not predator.

Wiley: Editor--predator--what's the difference?

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Wiley: There's a natural visceral reaction we have to bears, and a connection. Besides, they're fun to draw.

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Washington, D.C.: Most (all?) of your drawings are drawn as if you are looking down at the subjects. I like it and it distinguishes itself from other strips. Was that a conscious decision you made?

Wiley: No, it's just that I'm 17 feet tall.

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Fairfax, Va.: Hi Mr. Miller, first let me thank you for all the laughs you've given me. I found out recently that your strip appears as a panel in some newspapers. I was wondering if you draw two versions or one drawing and then crop it for each format? Also which

format do you prefer to see your work displayed in?

Wiley: This relates to the perspective issue mentioned in the last question. I've developed a format to draw both the strip and panel cartoons as one piece of art, by taking a different perspective. This allows me to fill out the panoramic dimension of both the strip and panel in a natural way, as opposed to the eye-level view where you just stretch things out. Then I separate the two cartoons on the computer.

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McLean, Va.: What is your experience with the law that allows you to have such humorous and insightful cartoons about lawyers? Did you plan on being a lawyer? Do you have lawyer friends?

Wiley: There's no reason to get nasty by insinuating that I have some connection with the legal profession. Again, I'm an editorial cartoonist, and what I do is observational, topical humor. I don't deal in partisan politics. I deal in real-life politics. The legal system is so ingrained in our everyday life, that it's something that we all relate to and despise. And that includes lawyers. I hear from a lot of lawyers who thank me for this work. The only ones that get upset about it are the lawyers who see themselves in the satire.

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Arlington, Va.: I love "ObviousMan". Was there a specific spark for that character, or is it just a general lament about the loss of common sense in America?

Wiley: The latter. We all see these inane things watching the news on TV, when we get so frustrated that we throw our pillows at it. Things like when the solution is just staring everyone in the face, but no one speaking up. So Obviousman was the perfect superhero for the new millennium.

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Somerville, Mass.: Love the cartoons and your sense of the absurd, Wiley! Out of curiosity, why do your images of men all have pear-shaped heads?

Wiley: Pear-shaped is funnier than round.

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Washington, D.C.: I've been practicing cartooning for a few years on my own and I'd like to get my single-panel cartoons and longer strips published. Any suggestions on how to get my cartoons critiqued by an experienced cartoonist? I need guidance on how to improve my composition, drawing, and overall presentation. Are there any good correspondence courses or cartooning workshops for adults?

Wiley: Cartooning is a self-taught art form. There is no school of cartooning. That's why you see such a variety of styles on the comics pages. Best advice I can give is to get a copy of Lee Nordling's book, "Your Career in the Comics." You'll get all the answers you need on getting started from that book, much more than I can give you here.

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Reston, 20190: Do you read any online comics, such as userfriendly? Have a favorite?

Wiley: I don't read any online comics. I don't have time. The few that I've seen aren't very good. It gives you an idea of what the syndicates must have to wade through. I'm sure there's a lot of good stuff out there, I just don't do any surfing on the Web for comics or anything else.

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Washington, D.C.: Do syndicated cartoonists make a lot of money?



Wiley: We're all disgustingly wealthy. Seriously, to put it very simply, we're still working at 1970 wages. That was the last time there was a hike in the rate for syndicated comics.

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Arlington, Va.: I really like the look of your cartoons. How do you do your crosshatching? Some of it appears to be by hand, other sections look like they're computer-generated.

Wiley: There's the inkwork and I don't do crosshatching, it's modeling the lines. I'll also use a gray shade, which I'll do on the computer.

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Farragut Spring: I love the cartoon and many thanks for coming out with a Page-a-Day calendar, as now I can get my daily chuckle twice. When, though, can we expect the first Homer book? Thanks for taking my question, and keep up with the GREAT work!

Wiley: If you are a publisher, please call me immediately. If not, you'll have to wait til I find one.

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Cambridge, England: 4. Are there days where you lack motivation?

Wiley: I work everyday because of the incessant nature of deadlines in syndicated work. Some days are better than others, but there's always something stupid going on to comment on.

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Rockville, Md.: Once you have an idea, how long does it take you to

draw a cartoon strip? And how soon do you have to have it ready before it's published in the newspaper? Thanks!

Wiley: Like any piece of art, every one takes it's own time. I put a lot of emphasis on the artwork, so it probably tends to take longer than the average comic. We don't time it while we're doing it, we just lose ourselves in the work. I'm working on the July cartoons right now and I'm on deadline. So it's a lead time of several weeks.

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Amherst, Mass.: Why do you draw cartoons? Is it for pleasure, do you hope to change people's mind, do you just like telling jokes, or is there a different purpose?

Wiley: All of the above and none of the above. You can never hope to change anybody's mind. The most you can hope for is to get people to THINK about something. And if you didn't genuinely love this art, it'd kill you, because of the unrelenting nature of the deadlines.

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Lehi, Utah: I can't "chat" from here, so I'll leave a comment. "Peanuts" ended. "Bloom County" ended. "Calvin and Hobbes" ended. Thank you, Wiley, for helping fill the void. Your Sunday series on the election is priceless! We refer to Not-Nearly-Curious-Enough-George as "the Unificaterer" around our house these days! Thanks again!

Wiley: Thank you, that's the highest praise a cartoonist can hope for.

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Los Angeles, Calif.: On average, how many hours do you work every day? Do you think it's too many or too few? Do you like being a cartoonist?

Wiley: I work 7 days a week. I'm usually in here by 9 and sometimes I'll work until 10 or 11 at night. Again, you don't think of the hours you're putting in. It's like anyone who's self-employed, you work harder for yourself than you would for someone else.

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Fairfax, Va.: Whatever happened to Pierre of the North?

Wiley: Pierre of the North was a silly little recurring character that I did in the first year of the strip. The syndicate asked me to stop doing him because the French Canadian editors were afraid it would be insulting to their readers, since he spoke with a French accent. And, since it was the first year of the strip, you tend to walk on eggshells. But maybe I'll bring him back.

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Washington, D.C.: What comic strips do you like and/or read regularly (besides your own!)?

Wiley: So many of the creators are friends or colleagues, you get lost between which strips you genuinely like, and which people you genuinely like. But I read and enjoy all forms of cartoons, from gag cartoons like those in the New Yorker, comic strips and editorial cartoonss. It's like the difference between a play, a movie and a television show. They're all different forms of entertainment, but you enjoy them all.

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New York, N.Y.: Do the politicians you poke fun at ever get annoyed enough to sue?

Wiley: No, politicians are too vain to get upset by it. As long as you spell their name right, they don't care.

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Vancouver, B.C.: Hi Wiley! How do you feel about the syndication business today? Do you think a group of very popular cartoonists start a new syndicate, they have the chance to make things better?

Wiley: As nice as that sounds, no. The reality of it is that things are tougher today than they ever were in syndication, because of the continually shrinking market of the newspaper industry. Syndication relies on a viable and health newspaper industry and we just don't have that anymore.

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Wiley: Thanks and I enjoyed having direct contact with the readers today. My e-mail address is [wiley@non-sequitur.com](mailto:wiley@non-sequitur.com), if I didn't get to your question.

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Suzanne Tobin: Thaks so much, Wiley, for taking time out of your busy schedule. You were a great guest. We look forward to seeing that new book come out real soon. (You can take this transcript to the publishers to twist their arms!) Thanks for joining us and catch us again in two weeks when we have another fabulous cartoonist to be named later.